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Yanks missing in Asia —is there any hope?

By William Mullen

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BANGKOK, Thailand—The Vietnam War comes alive nearly every night in the expatriate American bars along Pat Pong Road as the men discuss former exploits, battles and comrades-in-arms.

Some of those former comrades are among the 2,500 Americans never accounted for in Indochina. That makes the debate here on whether Americans are still being kept alive as prisoners 10 years after the war ended a visceral, often-heated affair.

There always has been a lot of talk in the bars about organizing teams to slip into Laos to check out reports of American POW camps.

Most of it is just talk. But there are true believers who have kept themselves in battlefield condition and who are convinced of the possibility that former comrades still are in captivity.

SOME OF THEM already have "gone north," slipping over the Thai-Laotian border to look for evidence of prison camps even before James "Bo" Gritz made his recent, unsuccessful but celebrated forays. The earlier attempts also failed.

"Gritz was a jerk," said one longtime Bangkok resident.

"You don't go around broadcasting what you're up to before going out on an operation like he did. You do it like a couple of friends of mine are doing it.

They've got contacts with two Lao resistance groups that have great intelligence on where the camps are and, when the time is ripe, they're going to quietly go and find our guys."

That is assuming, of course, that there still are living American prisoners in Indochina. There is considerable dispute about that along Pat Pong.

"There are a lot of phonies around here," said Bob Moberg, a strapping man who is almost unconsciously fit for his 50 years.

He served throughout Indochina during the war, first as a decorated Green Beret officer in Vietnam, then as an airplane and helicopter pilot in Laos under contract to the CIA.

"**THERE ARE** a lot of would-be, never-was and has-been heroes who hang around Pat Pong talking about going up to Laos, but it's just to make themselves feel good," said Moberg, who recently moved to Singapore to take an executive position with an American oil company.

Moberg, who knows several of the MIAs, doubts that any of the 2,500 Americans unaccounted for in Indochina could still be alive. But he is also close to the few men who have risked their lives hunting for evidence in Laos, including Bo Gritz, an old battlefield comrade.

"I cannot believe, based on the intelligence that has come out, that anybody is still alive up there and being held against his will," Moberg said.

"After 10 years, eventually word of living POWs would have gotten out. I just don't feel they [the communists] would still be holding people in stockades.

"But I believe in Bo Gritz, and as long as he says he believes there may be living prisoners up there, I'll always have that doubt in my mind."

Moberg defends the occasional search missions launched into Laos, but he also questions the motivation behind them.

"A lot of it has to do with the adventure syndrome," he said. "Believe me, those guys who have gone in have had all the good intentions in the world. But it may be that after all the good intentions, it was the appeal of adventure and getting back into action that may have been the overriding factor that sent them back up there."

MOBERG AND THE Pat Pong expatriates are angered by what they see as a failure on the part of the American government to force the Vietnamese, Laotians and Cambodians to make a full accounting of the 2,500.

"Nobody should have to prove that there are people alive up there," Moberg said. "Our government ought to prove that they ain't there."

The U.S. government has its front-line office here in Bangkok in the attempt to account for the 2,500 missing men. The Joint Casualty Resolution Center [JCRC], established in 1973 and now headquartered in Hawaii, keeps a three-man team in the American Embassy.

The team, headed by Lt. Col. Paul Mather of the U.S. Air Force, gathers information on purported live-sightings, gravesites, airplane wrecks or anything else that might lead to the discovery of the remains of Americans left behind.

At issue are 2,452 American military men who disappeared during the war, along with 40 civilians and 67 foreign nationals. Victorious Indochinese communist governments never expressed knowledge of them as prisoners, known casualties or turncoats to the communist side.

MOST OF THE missing are believed to have died at the time of their disappearances. Of the military men, 81 percent were airmen, of whom more than three-quarters went down with their crippled aircraft.

The U.S. has records of many of the aircraft crash sites and hopes eventually to be able to recover the remains of those unaccounted for. Some of the planes crashed at sea or into deep, untracked jungles, and those remains may never be recovered.

Many of the others are known to be dead, such as a B-52 crew member who was killed in a crash in a botanical garden in Hanoi, but the communists have never accounted for his body.

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